The friendship between Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby epitomises the problematic differences between married and single women during the inter-war period. Brittain’s marriage in 1925 required an even greater readjustment in their relationship than that caused by the publication of *Anderby Wold*. That difference had to be continually re-negotiated and it is at the heart of the intertextual dialogue between Holtby’s final novel, *South Riding* (1936), and Brittain’s *Honourable Estate* (1936). Brittain was writing *Honourable Estate* as she corrected the proofs for *South Riding* after Holtby’s death, commenting: ‘What a strange experience of communion with [Holtby’s] spirit this proof-correcting is! In her book, all the time, she says the things that we both thought and said to one another’ (1986, 239). That ‘we’, suggesting that the women think as one, obscures the radical differences between the books. While Brittain’s novel sets up the ideal of ‘semi-detached marriage’ (redefining the ‘honourable estate’ of matrimony), Holtby’s offers a vision of female community based on shared work. Competition is still evident, however, in Brittain’s reflection that: ‘I shall never do anything to equal this!’ (1986, 228).

In both novels the friendship between women is centred in the protagonist’s connection, mediated by a man, with an older woman: Sarah Burton and Mrs Beddows, and Ruth Allendyne and her mother-in-law, Janet Rutherston. Thus, Kennard argues, both novels provide reconciliation with ‘mothers or substitute mothers’ and ‘a vindication of the mother’s life and work’ (1989, 161–2). The model of the female friend as a surrogate mother or daughter is a seductive one. Certainly, both novels assert the importance of situating the female subject in a maternal genealogy, and of acknowledging the mother’s identity as a separate subject. However, the linearity of this model with its movement towards
consensus is over-schematic, obscuring the endlessly fluid process of interaction in a living relationship. Friendships need ongoing maintenance, particularly during changes in career, marital status or location. What the Brittain–Holtby relationship demonstrates is how friends take up a range of different subject positions in relation to those changes. Holtby acted as mother, brother, colleague and/or lover to Brittain in response to Brittain’s needs. Although Brittain’s occupation of the positions of daughter, sister, colleague, and/or beloved is not at first glance an obvious response to Holtby’s needs, her positioning as such enabled Holtby to feel needed. Moreover, in Honourable Estate the connection with the older woman functions to distance the friendship, and remove it from the possibility of sexual desire, while in South Riding it is a way of making connections across the differences which divide women – age, marital status, class, politics.

The restructuring of the friendship around the time of Brittain’s marriage entailed a negotiation of the distinction between homosocial and homosexual behaviour and language which can be traced through their letters. Both Marion Shaw and Jean Kennard show how Brittain suppressed the more emotional language in their letters when she edited them for publication. She removed terms of endearment which included, as well as ‘darling’, ‘sweetieheart’ and ‘beloved’, the terms ‘lover’, ‘spouse’ and ‘husband’ (Shaw, n.d., 38; Kennard, 1989, 7). These suggest an appropriation of a heterosexual model for the friendship, which, once Brittain had a male lover, was no longer available without constructing Holtby as Catlin’s rival. Holtby’s subsequent deferral to Catlin’s right as Brittain’s husband to use such language works to neutralise any such rivalry.

Holtby’s earlier use of such a heterosexual discourse was one of a range of positions she took up in response to Brittain’s needs. Writing in December 1923 after an early letter from Catlin, Brittain comments: ‘I do hope that, after this lovely period of peace, some devastating male is not going to push into my life and upset it again’ and appeals to Holtby to act as ‘a bulwark’ (Brittain and Handley-Taylor, 1960, 28) to protect her. In return, Holtby takes a protective brotherly attitude towards Brittain, promising: ‘I’ll be your bulwark for as long as you want me. I regret that I have no Syren charms to entice away embarrassing suitors’ (Brittain and Handley-Taylor, 1960, 30). Holtby here constructs herself as sexually unattractive in comparison to Brittain, and, significantly, as Pam Johnson points out, wishes for ‘Syren charms’ not to tempt men on her own account but to keep them away from Brittain (1989, 155).